

**The Report committee for Zachary Daniel Sharp**

**Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:**

**“Divinitie, and Poesie, Met”: Herbert,  
Puttenham, and the Craft of the  
Devotional Lyric**

**APPROVED BY SUPERVISING  
COMMITTEE:**

---

Frank Whigham, Supervisor

---

Davida Charney, Co-Supervisor

**“Divinitie, and Poesie,  
Met”: Herbert, Puttenham,  
and the Craft of the  
Devotional Lyric**

by

**Zachary Daniel Sharp, B.A.**

**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
the University of Texas at Austin  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the  
Degree of

**Master of Arts**

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2015

**“Divinitie, and Poesie,  
Met”: Herbert,  
Puttenham, and the Craft  
of the Devotional Lyric**

by

Zachary Daniel Sharp, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

SUPERVISORS: Frank Whigham, Davida Charney

Recent scholarship which addresses the presence in George Herbert’s poetry of both a rhetoric of courtesy and of Christian piety generally regards the two as incompatible; scholars have sought to show that Herbert renounced this courtly rhetoric entirely, incorporated it somewhat reluctantly into his poetry, or was unable to suppress its global influence on his poetic method. I argue that what previous authors have neglected to consider when accounting for the

relationship of courtly rhetoric to Herbert's piety is the analogous function easing anxiety has in both courtesy theory and Reformed approaches to pastoral care. To this end, I aim to demonstrate that Herbert (who was himself a parson) incorporates into his major work, *The Temple*, a method of easing anxiety that Calvinism obviates: how to gauge and improve one's "rank" or status with regard to election or reprobation. Calvinism, specifically the "experimental predestinarian" tradition in England, transposes matters of agency from the sphere of works to that of faith, to the act of discovering evidence of one's election by close scrutiny of one's disposition toward believing. This, I claim, is similar to courtesy theory's aim to provide a metric for self-advancing conduct. I make the case that the overlap between the therapeutic functions of both predestinarian theology and courtesy theory can be located in the argument for aesthetic discernment found in George Puttenham's poetry manual/courtesy book, *The Art of English Poesy*. Rather than presenting rules of decorum, Puttenham presents extensive examples that, if one is able to discern from them rules of conduct, argue tacitly for the reader's the requisite faculty of discernment. By presenting a large number of elaborate poetic conceits, I believe that Herbert engages in a process that, by thematizing extensively in his poetry the complexities of Christian conduct, argues in turn for a similarly ingrained faculty of discernment; the ability to discern the "correct" rendering of doctrine in Herbert's poetry functions as evidence of election. Herbert thus works to ameliorate anxieties

surrounding matters of election by integrating a pastoral role into his lyrics not wholly at odds with matters of self-advancement.

## Table of Contents

Text .....	1
Bibliography .....	51

Attempts to account for the curious tension between George Herbert as a man on the make” and Herbert as a humble country parson have generally considered the relationship of piety and courtesy an either/or proposition: either he flirted with ambition and privilege (he certainly had both) only to renounce or fail at courtly life, or he accepted and recapitulated these ideals of courtly conduct in a religious rhetoric that incorporated their basic social logic. Richard Strier, for instance, believes Herbert’s early fascination with matters of ambition to be almost entirely absent from his mature lyrics. In Strier’s mind, while the “The Church-porch” represents a young, ladder-climbing Herbert, what he perceives as later additions to *The Temple* renounce such motives: “Herbert came to transcend the spiritual commercialism of ‘The Church-porch’ — Reformation theology, fully apprehended, took care of that.”<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Michael C. Schoenfeldt seeks to demonstrate that Herbert “shows not only how social concerns constantly interpenetrate the sacred world to which they are contrasted but also how devotional postures of submission are continually infiltrated by the subtle forms of opposition or ambition they both enable and disguise.”<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, Cristina Malcolmson places *The Temple* within the context of the “Sidney-Herbert coterie and its social rituals,” which in her mind integrated Herbert’s major religious lyrics into a situation of ambitious poetic contest.<sup>3</sup>

The general interpretive strategy suggested by the authors above is that we must account for the paradox between pious and self-advancing motives, insofar as piety is considered

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Strier, “Sanctifying the Aristocracy: ‘Devout Humanism’ in François de Sales, John Donne, and George Herbert,” *The Journal of Religion* 69, no. 1 (1989): 57.

<sup>2</sup> Michael C. Schoenfeldt, *Prayer and Power: George Herbert and Renaissance Courtship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 24.

<sup>3</sup> Cristina Malcolmson, *Heart-Work: George Herbert and the Protestant Ethic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 69.

antithetical to ambitious conduct: either these authors renounce the latter in favor of the former or they incorporate it as a somewhat foreign body into interpretations of Herbert's religious discourse. I seek to demonstrate that courtesy theory and Protestant theology reconcile themselves in Herbert to the degree that Herbert is invested in the pastoral duty of relieving anxiety about matters of election and reprobation, which, in light of Calvinism's elision agency regarding such matters (the doctrine of predestination precludes the ability to save oneself), involves a rhetoric of advancement as a *tacit* method of spiritual improvement. R.T. Kendall's study of English Calvinism asserts that "to urge men to make their calling and election sure to themselves" was one of several central principles on which mainstream English Protestant divines of the early seventeenth century based conceptions of pastoral care.<sup>4</sup> Courtesy theory, in one of its various modes, eased anxiety by providing a metric for efficacious conduct and an ability to code failure as an ethical progression away from a site of "corruption"<sup>5</sup> (rationalizing becoming a preacher instead of a courtier by convincing oneself that the court is corrupt, for instance), arguing for agency when in reality there was little to none involved. In Calvinism failure is doctrinal, as the Fall became the basis in predestinarian theology for theorizing the incapacity to advocate spiritually for oneself, and furthermore agency shifts to a similar capacity of self-perception —the capacity to perceive election becomes, in a circular form of reasoning, evidence for election.

In accounting for this elision of agency, I believe Herbert must engage in a practice of theorizing conduct intuited much earlier by George Puttenham. Instead of codifying rules of

---

<sup>4</sup> R.T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Bletchley: Paternoster, 1997), 25.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege: The Social Tropes of Elizabethan Courtesy Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 21.



conduct, Puttenham resorts to a catalog of historical examples of courtliness because, as he puts it, “decencies are of sundry sorts,”<sup>6</sup> and because difficulty inevitably results in explaining “what this good grace is and wherein it consisteth, for peradventure it be easier to conceive than to express.”<sup>7</sup> I argue that, just as Puttenham places the interpretive onus on the reader to *discern* matters of “decency,” so too does Herbert with regard to matters of Christian conduct represented in his poetry. Herbert understood that part of the allure of Reformation theology, manifested particularly in its Calvinist strains, was the allure of self-sufficiency: liberating faith from the arena of works is tantamount to arguing against the high-pressure sphere of conduct. Richard Strier identifies “the question with which... New Historicism has vainly struggled” as “the question of the appeal of Reformation theology.” His suggested answer, that this theology “provided a critique of and refuge from the world of competitive and self-serving strategizing of which the new historicists have given us so convincing a portrait”<sup>8</sup> is thus quite instructive in assessing the appeal Herbert might have ascribed to it. Yet Herbert also understood Reformation theology’s downside: its emphasis on interiority and spiritual self-sufficiency excluded a central advantage of explicit behavioral metrics like those found in courtesy theory, that of simply having the ability to *refer* to that metric for the purposes of gauging or improving one’s status. I do agree with Strier, however, that Herbert cannot simply recapitulate courtesy theory directly in

---

<sup>6</sup> George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy: A Critical Edition*, Edited by Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 3.23.350.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.23.347.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Strier, *Resistant Structures: Particularity, Radicalism, and Renaissance Texts* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995), 117.

his poetry,<sup>9</sup> which would commit him to the error of using the logic of worldly struggle to solve a Reformed theological problem that involves the tenuous relationship of faith to good works.

Herbert, then, must find a third way. Because spiritual goods can no longer be assessed according to their worldly benefit, and work can no longer bring one any assurance of obtaining what theologian William Perkins calls “saving faith,”<sup>10</sup> Herbert’s method must be one that allows scrutiny of decorous conduct that shows at least some measure of self-improvability in a context where labor is disallowed. He achieves this by performing a passive act with positive rhetorical and doctrinal force. By *not* correcting “errors” in his poetry — that is, by leaving in tension poems and parts of poems (conceits, images, metaphors, etc.) that are not always doctrinally coherent — he intentionally leaves behind a palimpsest of poetic conduct, forcing the reader to discern the correct doctrinal interpretation from it. This process accounts doctrinally for the “constant reinvention” that Helen Vendler points to in Herbert’s poetry, that a “Herbert poem is often ‘written’ three times over, with several different, successive, and self-contradictory versions coexisting in the poem.” While Vendler is concerned more with the “reinvention of the poem as it unfolds toward its final form,”<sup>11</sup> what I am concerned with here are Herbert’s possible theological motives behind the process itself, specifically how it functions as a device that argues for the reader’s ability to discern election. Readerly negotiations of decorum in Herbert’s poetry argue for this faculty of discernment in a way that codifying rules cannot; the fact that rules contain overt statements of how to improve, and thus do not involve the reader’s active will in

---

<sup>9</sup> See note 1 above.

<sup>10</sup> Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism*, 51-76.

<sup>11</sup> Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 29.

interpretation, lessens the readerly engagement necessary for such active attention to the faculty of discernment. This is one way of getting around the problem of representing behavior in a Calvinist context; the elaborate conceits, for which Herbert and other “Metaphysical” poets are so well known, in this sense, represent elaborate poetic situations that require discernment on the part of the reader to perceive the most “appropriate” interpretation of them. Success in doing so, I believe, would be of equal evidentiary status as other self-scrutinizing claims of election. How best to construct poems, the central question of Puttenham’s *Art of English Poesy*, in Herbert then becomes the question of how best to present to the reader tacit arguments for agency and self-improvability in the form of equally tacit arguments for the reader’s faculty of discernment.

### **Calvinist Anxiety and Self-Advancement**

Christian theology in general contains within it the global, ingrown failure of the Fall of Man. Perhaps cutting deeper in some than concerns over rank, the Fall entailed a crucial incapacity on the part of Christians to abide fully by God’s law. In essence, Reformation doctrine and courtesy culture seem inversely related to a central catalyzing anxiety that exists in both, that resulting from the tension between ascribed and achieved identity.<sup>12</sup> In sixteenth century aristocratic culture, increased social mobility made this particular breed of anxiety highly motivating to both established and upstart courtiers,<sup>13</sup> both of whom found in courtesy books strategies for dissembling achievements behind the rhetoric of ascription. Barbara Lewalski makes the crucial point that, to consider “biblical poetics” as a proper “Renaissance/seventeenth-

---

<sup>12</sup> Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege*, 1-31. This chapter, “Courtesy Literature and Social Change,” contains an extensive rendering of ascribed and achieved identity as the central catalyzing agent of Elizabethan aristocratic anxiety.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. See also Lawrence Stone, “Social Mobility in England, 1500-1700,” *Past & Present* 33 (1966): 16-17; 33-35.

century phenomenon,” we must look for its central assumptions and axioms in “such sixteenth- and seventeenth-century materials as biblical commentaries, rhetorical handbooks, poetic paraphrases of scripture, emblem books,” and so on. According to Lewalski, the wide dispersal of concerns surrounding art and religion, working in tandem in biblical *poetics*, must be accounted for by “the tensions over the relation of art and truth which were brought into new prominence by the Reformation.”<sup>14</sup> I would add that, for English gentlemen, the anxiety over status made them well prepared for the coming anxiety over election and reprobation that Reformation theology foregrounded and which came to a head in the seventeenth century, and thus that courtesy books in some capacity need to be added to that list. Easing anxiety is, as we have seen, one central motive which aligns the courtesy tradition and Protestant doctrine. In his study of the courtesy tradition, Frank Whigham argues that there are written into courtesy books tropes which gave those who failed at obtaining preferment or proximity to court the ability to mystify that failure “as a progression away from the grubbing for temporal power” behind “some transcendental ideal of pastoral or Neoplatonic society.” Here, one can see a degree of symmetry between maneuvering away from the pressure of climbing the sixteenth century English social ladder and the kind of “way out” Protestant interiority, grounded in its own kind of similarly “transcendent” doctrine, might have provided to an early seventeenth century aristocrat like Herbert. As Whigham claims, “A final central employment of these tropes of courtesy was to relieve these strains [of ‘stress and opportunity’], by postponing, accounting for, or mystifying the various levels of personal failure.”<sup>15</sup> The Calvinist strains of Reformed Christianity,

---

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 5.

<sup>15</sup> Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege*, 21.

introduced into England at the beginning of the seventeenth century by William Perkins and his coterie of “experimental predestinarians,” had to develop strategies to deal with similar anxieties arising from the elect/reprobate distinction<sup>16</sup> — what we might call Calvinism’s version of the distinction between achievement and ascription. While dogmatically Calvinism mirrors ascribed identity to the degree that, like the noble status of an aristocrat by birth, election is predetermined and cannot be actively sought by the individual Christian, in practice the doctrine of irresistible grace lead to enormous pressure to demonstrate belonging to the rank of the elect. Considering identity as it relates to social mobility, insofar as it involves questions of self-improvability and agency, makes for a useful analogue to the problem of identifying as elect: “Until the late fifteenth century, birth was the principle determinant of rank, the natural conduit for the self-evident. Individual skill, education, and rhetorical self-presentation might enhance the clarity of identity, or even improve the local conditions of life, but alteration of social rank by personal effort ... was quite uncommon.”<sup>17</sup> English Calvinism, especially that of Perkins, “begins with the assumption of the inalterable decree of reprobation.”<sup>18</sup> One crucial distinction between issues surrounding social mobility and Calvinist theology, however, is the fact that in Calvinist theology there was no “natural conduit for the self-evident.” The lack of evident class identifiers in Calvinism became both a source of anxiety and a means for its resolution: because the immutability of the decree of reprobation cannot be perceived as directly as social rank, enhancing the “clarity of identity” in effect became a kind of alteration of rank by a labor of self-

---

<sup>16</sup> Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism*, 1-9.

<sup>17</sup> Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism*, 7-8.

examination. The “inalterable decree” of election/reprobation thus functioned as a “warning to professing Christians to examine themselves lest they happen to possess but a temporary [self-deluding] faith.”<sup>19</sup> Self-presentation as a member of the elect in effect gained evidentiary status in the quest to discover whether one is in fact elect. In other words, in the Calvinist worldview, ascribed identity contained within it the means for its achievement. A.G. Dickens goes so far as to say that, “far from inducing fatalism, Calvinist doctrine instilled a burning desire to prove to oneself and others that one’s name stood upon the roll of the elect.”<sup>20</sup>

Calvin himself was equivocal on the exact nature of the relationship of faith to the active will, and furthermore on how much room there actually was for active self-improvement and agency in general within his theology. According to William J. Bouwsma, the humanist streak in Calvin that sought to order within the minds of his followers the disorder engendered by the Fall leads to such equivocation. Would not the rational reforming of the irrational, fallen mind be the type of agency predestinarian theology ostensibly argues against? Bouwsma claims as much:

Conceiving of sin as the result of the disorder of faculties ordered by nature and of salvation as the restoration of right order to the personality carried with it optimistic overtones of its classical origins hardly consistent with the doctrine of original sin. It was doubtless possible to interpret the conception in such a way as to safeguard in theory a religion of grace. But in practice the value it attached to the supposedly higher faculties of human beings encouraged belief in the possibility of reform by strengthening the mind through education and by moral effort.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>20</sup> A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, 2nd. ed., (University Park: Penn State Press, 1989), 224.

<sup>21</sup> William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 81.

English Calvinists imported this equivocation on the active will in form of the doctrine of voluntarism, insofar as “voluntarism (faith as an act of the will in contrast to a passive persuasion in the mind) gained ascendancy in the Perkins tradition.”<sup>22</sup> What these theologians developed in order to help the laity to cope with anxieties over election/reprobation was the idea of “preparation,” which “emerged as a rationale by which anxious souls could determine as soon as possible that they were not eternally damned [i.e., that they indeed had saving faith].” With ascendancy of the Perkins tradition in England, the lay Christian gained the ability to scrutinize himself as being either elect or reprobate:

Preparation for faith ... may be simply understood as the process by which a man becomes willing to believe [i.e., the data point to the fact that he is elect]. This process is to be seen largely as a function of God’s Law and is either that which may be included *in* the regeneration process but prior to faith, or prior to both regeneration and faith. Regeneration may be defined as the gift of saving faith which characterizes the elect alone, never the reprobate. In other words, to know that one is regenerate is to know one is elected to salvation.<sup>23</sup>

Far from its stereotype as a collective neurosis, Calvinist self-scrutiny represents a practical effort by theologians to help believers obtain evidence by which to assess one’s worth within a profoundly pessimistic, anxiety-provoking model of existence. In a quite telling turn of phrase, Perkins defines the knowledge of saving faith as “experimental” knowledge; the empirical implication of *testability* is not anachronistic or accidental. Such “experimenting” was performed with aid of the “practical syllogism,” a form of theological reasoning used for purposes of assurance. If the Christian asks himself whether or not he believes earnestly and after close scrutiny that he has been given saving faith, and answers yes, then this itself is

---

<sup>22</sup> Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

evidence that he is elect. As Kendall has it, “the method of achieving assurance of salvation is to scrutinize the claim of faith in oneself; if found to be true, the conclusion follows that one has *saving* [rather than temporary] faith.”<sup>24</sup> Being the experimenter allowed the English Calvinist a certain degree of agency to define where he stands before God he otherwise would not have had.

Yet all of this leads to a telling paradox: in both cases, the courtier and the Calvinist are striving to be what they (ideologically or doctrinally) already are. Careful maneuvering and self-posturing become equally essential to both, and it is in how to inhabit these highly unstable ideological and doctrinal positions that we find the greatest performative overlap between Calvinism and courtesy theory. In the strain of English Calvinism described above, self-improving labor (indeed *all* matters involving the active will) is reconceptualized as active contemplation; “scrutinizing the claim of faith in oneself” as a function of the active will in effect argues into existence a regenerate, and thus self-evidently elect, Christian. The ingrained faculty of the discernment of regeneration actively argues, through the doctrine of voluntarism, for the equally ingrained status of election; assurance thus rests on the active will “discovering” (in reality arguing for the fact) that one belongs to the rank of the elect. As we shall see, it is this process’s emphasis on discernment and self-scrutiny that allows it to be aligned with the argument for the capacity of aesthetic discernment in Puttenham.

### **Poetic Conduct in Puttenham’s *Art of English Poesy* and Herbert’s *Temple***

I noted in the introduction how Puttenham is beneficial for reading *The Temple* insofar as aesthetic discernment in *The Art* is analogous with regard to Herbert’s argument for assurance: Herbert cannot codify the rules by which to gauge election (no such universal rules exist that

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 9



would work to assure the Christian in his particular situation, as it is his own responsibility to search for signs of election). Puttenham will show how this theologically motivated dictum against rule making is also militated against by an ambitious poetic context; in face of the ruling dictum of *sprezzatura* (hiding the labor of artful speech behind a pretense of ease), the writer must not look like he is having to resort to rules, aesthetic or otherwise, because doing so would seem laborious, and fail for that reason. Puttenham's explanation of decorum by use of example allows instances of decorum to be ascertained and scrutinized — purportedly if one has the right amount of discernment already, but also due in large part to the skill involved in recounting and constructing the example. Puttenham thus disassembles labor by exporting it to the discerning faculty of his readers (he is *simply* recounting highly relevant examples).

Before exploring this overlap between Puttenham and Herbert's formal methods, recent charges of the inaccuracy of Puttenham's work on courtesy theory, made convincingly by Steven W. May, need to be addressed. Since the rationale of this essay is that Puttenham's version of courtesy theory has much to bring to the table in assessing the influence of courtesy theory in general on Herbert's poetics, that version must retain some degree of accuracy in theorizing courtly conduct. Such accuracy, May asserts, is absent from Puttenham's work entirely. May's argument suggests that, because Puttenham was a rake and a fugitive whom the court took pains to keep at distance, he had no basis on which to make his claims about the Elizabethan court, and thus no clout to advise anyone as to matters of courtly conduct. As May has it, "This new understanding of Puttenham's actual, out-of-court career, is grounded in the historical record rather than his self-representation in *The Art*. It substantially alters our interpretation of all the

writings attributed to him.”<sup>25</sup> While Puttenham certainly had access to the literature made by and for courtiers disseminated throughout England, May vitiates the question of indirect influence quite succinctly: “courtiership by osmosis is, moreover, untenable over and above the fact that Puttenham failed to parlay the advice set forth in *The Art* into his own promotion at court.”<sup>26</sup> Puttenham’s version of courtship thus looks to be quite useless. However, the operative word here may be *version*. If the paradigmatic situation that made up the court was one of “asymmetrical power relations between audience and performer... and the reification and sale of personal image,”<sup>27</sup> then Puttenham seems to have understood this aspect of courtesy quite well; if literary history counts for anything here, dissembling is something Puttenham mastered. May also cites the fact that Puttenham never actively sought to be a part of the Elizabethan court as another indication of his unreliability.<sup>28</sup> According to Whigham, however, most courtiers took directions from the “imaginative projection of the ultimate Other who ‘knows what he is doing’”: “the typical courtier’s dominant Other will be the embodiment of a nonexistent ‘public opinion,’” readable in mirroring responses of witnesses but dangerously evanescent. In fact, no one is in charge here.”<sup>29</sup> This raises the question of who really knew what was going on. Ultimately, though, what May implies is that direct access to the Elizabethan court is a precondition for explaining it, which makes scholarship on the subject a strangely self-defeating activity. To the

---

<sup>25</sup> Steven May, “George Puttenham’s Lewd and Illicit Career,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 50, no. 2 (2008): 160.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 163

<sup>27</sup> Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege*, 32

<sup>28</sup> May, “Puttenham’s Lewd and Illicit Career,” 160.

<sup>29</sup> Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege*, 39

court we might ascribe the platitude that human behavior is consistently inconsistent, and that first-hand knowledge has no special claim to reliability. Julia Lamb, on the other hand, argues that the court functions more like dramatic scenery in *The Art*, bringing “contextuality itself to bear on rhetoric, allowing Puttenham to picture particular kinds of human activity: duplicity, subterfuge, and ambiguity.”<sup>30</sup> Why this is important to a study on Herbert is that he as well, I am arguing, is someone who intuited the rules of courtesy without ever being, or perhaps ever wanting to be a courtier.<sup>31</sup> In the end, both Puttenham and Herbert wanted to teach their readers about equally mysterious topics, and it should be kept in mind that teachers are often not the best practitioners of their respective arts.

Two other reasons why we should consider what Puttenham has to say about courtesy are in fact suggested by May’s reading. The first is that May presents Puttenham *as a failure*, (in short, that “Puttenham’s revised biography as it emerges from this newly available evidence differs substantially from his received image as a savvy and experienced courtier”<sup>32</sup>), which overlaps with the insecure Calvinist in need of assurance to the degree that he must find a way to theorize and mobilize a self-conceived, conceptually-driven account of conduct (rather than one that is experientially attested to from the vantage point of success), the perks of which Puttenham must in some way have intuited he could not possibly achieve. The second point (related to the

---

<sup>30</sup> Julia Lamb, “A Defense of Puttenham’s *Arte of English Poesy*,” *English Literary Renaissance* 39, no. 1 (2009): 28.

<sup>31</sup> For the controversy surrounding whether or not Herbert sought or failed to gain higher office (or even, like Donne, sought rectorship for its possibility of advancement), see Helen Wilcox, *ODNB*, “George Herbert,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4-6.

<sup>32</sup> May, “Puttenham’s Lewd and Illicit Career,” 160.

first) is Puttenham's reliance on the observation of the conduct of foreign courts: "It must be noted, however, that the author does qualify, if not undercut wholesale, the professed familiarity with the English court" due to a purported "broad knowledge of continental courts."<sup>33</sup> While this does not help to legitimate the points Puttenham makes about the specific nature of the English court, it speaks to an attempt by Puttenham to present a general theory of decorum. This intention is evidenced by his statement that "decencies are of sundry sorts"; such a picture of "decencie" resists theorizing of the specific sort that would make his document more historically accurate, but such specificity would also make it *The Art* much less interesting, as it would then fail to account for decorum as a universal phenomenon that translates itself across countries and time periods — and, furthermore, between ostensibly incompatible ideologies like Calvinism and Renaissance courtship.

Such a generalized picture of courtly conduct has been used with regard to Herbert by Schoenfeldt, who argues that Herbert seeks to show the "insidious consequences of aligning behavior towards heavenly authority with actual courtly practice."<sup>34</sup> I hope to show in what follows that Herbert's formal method (Schoenfeldt speaks only of content) is productively conversant with Puttenham's version of courtesy theory. The reasoning, as we have seen, is theological: the constricting dictum which Puttenham foregrounds in Herbert is the doctrinal obviation of good works by justifying faith. According to Strier, Herbert himself knew well this doctrine's restrictive and counterintuitive nature: "Like Luther, Calvin, and all the strict maintainers of their theology, Herbert knew that the doctrine of grace alone was almost

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>34</sup> Schoenfeldt, *Prayer and Power*, 22.

impossible to keep sharply and constantly in focus; he knew that the belief that it merely advocated an internalized form of work would always haunt it.”<sup>35</sup> As we have seen, the English Calvinists, with which Herbert likely identified insofar as he also identified with basic Lutheran doctrine, argued for the active will as an operator in the act of self-scrutiny. So far, this dances around a central issue: like courtly *sprezzatura*, Reformation Christianity needed to obscure its own special kind of labor behind doctrinal rhetoric.<sup>36</sup> The way Puttenham achieves something similar is found in Lamb’s account of Puttenham’s method of using examples. According to Lamb, the *Art of English Poesy* simply reasserts the purposive nature of speech — which in her account implies teaching by example — because the rules of decorous speech and poetry can only be apprehended by acute discernment.<sup>37</sup> This places Puttenham’s theory of “teaching” squarely in line with both Whigham and R. Malcolm Smuts, the latter of whom considers Herbert in light of contemporary aesthetics, specifically that favored by the Renaissance art connoisseur. Puttenham should be considered, that is, from the overlapping perspectives of both of the connoisseur and the courtier. Teaching a poetics of conduct requires the gentleman to be “a discerning student of mankind, adept at reading the spiritual makeup of individuals through their expressions and gestures,”<sup>38</sup> which overlaps with the discerning faculty of reading one’s

---

<sup>35</sup> *Love Known*, 70.

<sup>36</sup> “In classical rhetoric the *genus tenue* was not a style devoid of artistry; rather it was characterized by *hidden craftsmanship*, by a subdued degree of ornament compatible with its emphasis on clarity and its conversational manner” (my italics). Michael P. Gallagher, “Rhetoric, Style, and George Herbert,” *ELH* 37, no. 4 (1970): 496. *Sprezzatura* thus has at least oblique connections to Christian rhetoric’s adoption of the classical plain style.

<sup>37</sup> Lamb, “A Defense,” 34.

<sup>38</sup> R. Malcolm Smuts, *Court Culture and the Origins of a Royalist Tradition in Early Stuart England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 159.

courtly audience for signs of favor or disfavor.<sup>39</sup> For Puttenham, this discernment is not something that can be captured by rules. Puttenham considers it a natural faculty that requires simply being called to mind rather than argued for directly or codified. As Lamb asserts,

The trajectory of the *Arte* toward the formalization of a uniquely English art of poetry is deeply paradoxical in that it both presupposes an existing level of formalization in actual use (from which this art is to be drawn), and emphasizes a need for that art to be consciously and conscientiously (re)asserted by poets. In thus formalizing in an instructional manual those rules already operative in English poetic practice, Puttenham aims to configure existing use into a usable entity, one by which poets may operate with greater purposiveness and intent.<sup>40</sup>

It is this “greater purposiveness and intent,” communicated explicitly in *The Art*, which makes *The Art* so effective for exploring issues of conduct in Herbert. Derek Attridge compares the presence of Puttenham’s labor in communicating issues of conduct and poetics against Sidney’s *Defense of Poesie*: whereas in the latter “tensions and contradictions tend to disappear under the immaculate surface of courtly *sprezzatura*,” Puttenham’s treatise does not put to use the “rhetorical and persuasive powers that are, in part, its subject.”<sup>41</sup> Attridge’s main point is that there is a central contradiction in how Puttenham uses the terms “nature” and “art” — depending on whether poetry or conduct are praised for utilizing art to improve upon nature or for demonstrating mimetically nature’s excellence, “nature” and “art” can be interchangeably approbative or pejorative. To this end, Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn state the following about Puttenham’s project:

---

<sup>39</sup> Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege*, 38-39.

<sup>40</sup> Lamb, “A Defense,” 28.

<sup>41</sup> Derek Attridge, “Puttenham’s Perplexity: Nature, Art, and the Supplement in Renaissance Poetic Theory,” In *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, Edited by Patricia Parker and David Quint, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 258.

*Poetry is thus both like and unlike the crafts.* The poet's relation to measure [meter and proportion] links him with the craftsman, who is artful, even unnatural. When he speaks of another man's doings... he works in a foreign material, as Puttenham says the painter and carver do. When he uses figures, argues subtly, persuades copiously and vehemently, he works like the cunning gardener, coadjutor with nature, furthering her conclusions, making them strange.<sup>42</sup>

And yet, by contrast, Puttenham's archetypal poet also works "by [nature's] own peculiar virtue and proper instinct and not by example or meditation as all other artificers do":

In this case he is most admired when most natural and least artificial— yet *to be honored for both* (since language is both suggested by nature and polished by art), but more for avoiding the unseasonable artfulness, dissembling it well, than for grossly affecting and indiscreetly displaying it, "as many makers and orators do."<sup>43</sup>

The distinction here is quite similar to what distinguishes *sprezzatura* and *affettazione* in

Castiglione.<sup>44</sup> In dealing with upstart courtiers, the established courtier can seek to expose his rival as laboriously affected, whereas he himself comes by his manners naturally:<sup>45</sup>

The courtier must at all times avoid affectation because it is a sign of labor. Two forms of attack on affectation can be distinguished. One sort of affectation is deceitful: the familiar false claim to a virtue or capacity one does not have... But another kind of attack reveals knowledge as being exercised only with strain; this is a matter of trying too hard. Here the issue is not overt deceit but the stylistic virtue of self-management.<sup>46</sup>

Like Puttenham himself, Attridge implies that, manifested by its lack of the "stylistic virtue of self-management," *The Art* was "designed to fail."<sup>47</sup> I think it is perhaps more apt to say,

---

<sup>42</sup> Puttenham, *Art of English Poesy*, 49.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>44</sup> Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege*, 148.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 270.

however, that Puttenham *demonstrates* failure, whether it be a failure to dissemble labor in the fashion of *sprezzatura*, or, more importantly, a failure to hide the bivalent logic by which it functions. Indeed, the contradictory presentation of “nature” and “art” (for which we could very easily substitute “faith” and “good works” in the Calvinist scheme) makes clear that something about what Puttenham calls the “rabble of scholastical precepts”<sup>48</sup> in fact resists theory. Nature, a phenomenon with the seemingly contradictory definitions of something essentially good and yet something that needs to be improved by art, captures Puttenham’s inclusiveness with regard to art’s variable definitions and capacities. Victoria Kahn notes how exactly this “resistance to theory” motivates Puttenham’s treatment of decorum, and how this approach furthers his argument for active discernment of conduct:

Puttenham’s recourse to examples in his discussion of decorum is instructive. Just as prudence or decorum cannot be defined once and for all in the form of ‘scholastical precepts’ but must instead be *instanced* in particular examples, so the author wishing to educate the reader’s judgment — to make that judgment more prudent or decorous — must also make use of examples. Puttenham’s reflection on the resistance of decorum to theorizing ... takes the form of a practice of examples of exemplary practice, on the assumption that such examples will involve the reader in a practice of interpretation which is essential for the active life.<sup>49</sup>

That is, resistance to theory, doctrine, rules, etc. is proportional to how much the reader is *involved* in the text, which argues implicitly that the reader gets out of Puttenham’s examples that “brought with them no doctrine or institution”<sup>50</sup> exactly what he puts in. Here Puttenham might actually obscure in one stroke both his own inadequacies and labor by skirting the issue,

---

<sup>48</sup> Puttenham, *Art of English Poesy*, 3.23.349.

<sup>49</sup> Victoria Kahn, “Humanism and the Resistance to Theory,” In *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, Edited by Patricia Parker and David Quint (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 377-78.

<sup>50</sup> Puttenham, *Art of English Poesy*, 3.23.349.



pointing implicitly to the reader's discernment as the questionable artifact rather than his text — all of which emphasizes the importance of the reader's discernment of “metrical speech corrected and reformed by discreet judgments.”<sup>51</sup>

The argument for a displacement to the reader of the faculty of discernment can indeed be marshaled as evidence for Puttenham's ignorance of the rules of conduct specific to the English court. However, in doing so, he also signals the fact that he perhaps intuited the foundational role that ignorance of rules has, as Pierre Bourdieu claims, for accurate accounts of behavior:

Even those forms of interaction seemingly most amenable to description in terms of “intentional transfer into the Other”, such as sympathy, friendship, or love, are dominated (as class homogeneity attests), through the harmony of habitus [the generative principle of action that tends to reproduce regularities of the objective conditions in practice], that is to say, more precisely, the harmony of ethos and tastes ... by the objective structure of the relations between social conditions. The illusion of mutual election or predestination arises from the ignorance of the social conditions for the harmony of aesthetic tastes or ethical leanings, which is thereby perceived as evidence of the ineffable affinities which spring from it.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, “ineffability” obtains when the objective factors in play cannot be adequately explained by the logical moves possible within the culture in which they are operative— any complex behavior, according to Bourdieu, is necessarily to some degree mysterious to the practitioner; thus Bourdieu's definition of the *habitus* as “the source of these series of moves which are objectively organized as strategies without being the product of a genuine strategic intention.”<sup>53</sup> This in fact renders any project of codifying rules pointless, and makes the

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 1.8.113.

<sup>52</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 82.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 73.

comprehensive *description of situations* all the more important:

To eliminate the need to resort to “rules,” it would be necessary to establish in each case a complete description (which invocation of rules allows one to dispense with) of the relation between the habitus, as a socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures, and the socially structured situation in which the agents’ *interests* are defined, and with them the objective functions and subjective motivations of their practices. It would then become clear that, as Weber indicated, the juridical or customary rule is never more than a *secondary principle* of the determination of practices, intervening when the primary principle, interest, fails.<sup>54</sup>

How an author *elucidates* matters conduct thus becomes supremely important. The fact that Puttenham either consciously seeks to obviate the need for or has no realistic option (as May has it) to codify “rules” of courtly conduct means that he must provide many comprehensive examples of decorous behavior in order to accurately map the subjective interests involved in accounting for the *practice* (rather than a theory) of courtesy. In any case, this method at least intuits what Bourdieu has laid out above, that the observer of behavior must in some fashion account for the system of interlinked interests if he is to get at the *subjective* factors motivating that behavior as well as the objective motivating factors (nascent capitalism in Malcolmsen’s account of the work ethic as it applies Herbert’s poetry, as we shall see below). As Bourdieu argues, this means that an observer of conduct must come up with some kind of comprehensive description, which is exactly what Puttenham’s *Art* accomplishes. In the introductory section of his lengthy chapter containing these examples, Puttenham states the following:

The case then standing that discretion must chiefly guide all those businesses, since there be sundry sorts of discretion all unlike, even as there be men of action or art, I see no way so fit to enable a man truly to estimate decency as example.... But by reason of the sundry circumstances that man’s affairs are, as it were, wrapped in, this decency comes to be very much alterable and subject to variety, insomuch as our speech asketh one manner of decency in respect of the person who speaks, another of him to whom it is spoken, another of whom we speak, another of what we speak, and in what place and time and to

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 76.

what purpose. And as it is of speech, so of all other behaviors. We will therefore set you down some few examples of every circumstance how it alters the decency of speech or action.<sup>55</sup>

Puttenham is attempting to deal with familiar rhetorical concepts such as *kairos* (a sense of good timing) and, more importantly, *phronesis* (prudence or practical wisdom) that both obtain in cases of good speaking, both of which presuppose the variability of situations as a problem that needs to be dealt with by the speaker in order to communicate effectively or come across well to his audience. Such practical wisdom has been theorized as far back as Aristotle, who makes perhaps the clearest connection of prudence to generality in the following passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “It seems proper to a prudent person to be able to deliberate finely about things that are good and beneficial to himself, not about some restricted area — about what sorts of things promote health or strength, for instance — but about what sorts of things promote living well in general.”<sup>56</sup> According to Aristotle, like theory or codification, prudence is an “intellectual virtue,” “but whereas theory includes the intelligence of first causes and the necessary and universal consequences, prudence is concerned with action within the realm of contingent human affairs.”<sup>57</sup> Aristotle, Bourdieu, and Puttenham have all come to basically the same conclusion independently, that the “contingency of human affairs” elides the possibility of a rulebook for specific situations.

Herbert himself addresses this lack of recourse to rules in “Sinne” (1). The sonnet is, initially, a catalog of protectives against sin, emphasized by the (perhaps ironic) first line, “Lord,

---

<sup>55</sup> Puttenham, *Art of English Poesy*, 3.23.349.

<sup>56</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Translated by Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 1140a25-30.

<sup>57</sup> Kahn, “Humanism and the Resistance to Theory,” 376.

with what care hast thou begirt us round!” These protectives are presented unambiguously as rules and laws: “Parents first season us: then schoolmasters / Deliver us to laws; they send us bound / To rules of reason” (2-4). This proceeds to mature experiences of “Afflictions sorted, anguish of all sizes, / Fine nets and stratagems to catch us in” (6-7), progressing onward towards advanced theological rumination in the quatrain before the concluding couplet:

Blessings beforehand, tyes of gratefulness,  
The sound of glorie ringing in our eares:  
Without, our shame; within, our consciences;  
Angels and grace, eternall hopes and fears. (9-12)

One can get the sense that the increasingly universal scope and high spiritual stakes mentioned here (culminating in the phrase “eternall hopes and fears”) outrank the now rather simple-seeming instruction of “laws” and “rules of reason.” As implied by the progression in age and/or maturity of the speaker, simple approaches are revealed to be supremely naïve when confronted with the vicissitudes of Christian experience (the “sound of glorie ringing in our ears” contrasted with “shame” and “consciences”; “Angels and grace” contrasted with “eternall hopes and fears”). Of course, these are all, ostensibly, positive gestures: ruminating on one’s “eternall” status is equally instructive in Calvinist doctrine as contemplating “Angels and grace.” Mature contemplation is not enough, however, as we see in the concluding couplet: “Yet all these fences and their whole aray / One cunning bosome-sinne blows quite away” (13-14). The elaborate, systematic structures that defend one (metaphorized in the image of defensive military formation), be it in naive “rules” taught to schoolchildren or in careful and mature meditations on the balance of positive and negative behavioral reinforcements within Christian experience, are all blown “quite away” by “bosome-sinne,” the ingrained fallibility against which external defenses cannot protect. This scenario goes back to Bourdieu’s notion of ineffability: one is

never given privileged access to the “larger” factors guiding behavior (whether they be material or, here, spiritual): like the sudden realization of the impropriety of these methods to defend against sin in “Sinne” (1), violation in matters of conduct are apprehended most often only in the *act* of violation.

Herbert’s orientation towards following rules is also made summarily clear by his claim, appropriately in “The H. Scriptures” (II), for a close economy of the Word and individual experience:

Such are thy secrets, which my life makes good,  
And comments on thee: for in ev’ry thing  
Thy words do finde me out, & parallels bring,  
And in another make me understood. (9-12)

The scriptures are an interpretive guide to multifaceted experience, but one that can only be borne out *by* experience (they are the “secrets, which my life makes good”). One does not get the sense here of someone following rules, but rather assessing his behavior by comparing it to a multitude of scriptural precedents (tantamount to assessing behavior by example in Puttenham). This also implies that Christianity’s basic standards of morality (whether it be the Decalogue or the more generalized *imatatio Christi*) are only fully understood or appreciated once they have been enacted and scrutinized. That is, while scripture can most assuredly function normatively, as an *assessment* scripture becomes relevant only after particular actions to be assessed have already been carried out. Such a process is ongoing; new, ambiguous situations inevitably arise. Vendler notes how Herbert relies on *comprehensum* rather than the individual *datum*, for which she means the interpretations of his poems rest in their finality, being understood *as a whole*<sup>58</sup> — we can now add another sense of *comprehensum* to her definition (which perhaps already implies

---

<sup>58</sup> Vendler, *Poetry of George Herbert*, 39.

it), that of *included* or *contained*. Herbert's corpus, that is, aims for comprehensiveness as well as variability.

The preceding argument should show Herbert addressing, in light of Puttenham's account of courtesy, the issues of aristocratic taste and behavior as they relate to the basic pastoral problem of English Calvinism—the need for assurance. Also, it should hopefully widen the scope of Fish's initial insight about the rhetoricity of Herbert's poems and the function of readerly attention, that Herbert's poetics “is tied not to the structure of doctrine ... but to the structure of the situation, and its goal is not the orderly disposition of a body of knowledge, but the arrival at that knowledge of a respondent who has come to it himself.”<sup>59</sup> I would only add here that the structure of doctrine, insofar as it is mediated through English Calvinism, is better integrated into the rhetorical character of Herbert's poetry than Fish seems to allow. Yet if we are to fully understand Herbert's method of assuring his reader, how exactly such readerly attention involves matters of taste that are analogous to the voluntarist discernment of election requires further explication.

### **Protestant Poetics and the “Art” of Poetry**

The importance of the overlap between courtly and Calvinist decorum to Herbert is that, insofar as he seeks to teach as well as delight his reader with aesthetic excellence, he allows performative standards of poetic conduct to enter into a dialectic with the Protestant doctrine he aims to convey: how he manages the craft of his poetry, as an external formal object that is a soul's exertion, may help determine how successful he is at establishing evidence for election, insofar as it places onus on the reader: doctrine is, in a sense, emphasized by the construction of

---

<sup>59</sup> Stanley Fish, *The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 23-24.

the of the poems as problematic formal objects. In fact, disjunctions between the “constructedness” of Herbert’s poems that Vendler has demonstrated and their content constitute an internal critique that is the principal formal engine that so effectively drives home Herbert’s theological subject matter in the short space of the lyric poem.<sup>60</sup> Like nature and art in Puttenham, poetry for Herbert is something that is both highly artificial (that is, a craft) and, insofar as Protestant theology stands for what is “natural” (i.e., unaffected) to Herbert, a “coadjutor with nature, furthering her conclusions.” In his discussion of “Confession” and “Sinnes Round,” for instance, Strier notes how Herbert’s involuted style exhibits an internalized critique. These poems, for instance, by engaging in a Lutheran attack on rational capacity, use “wit to attack wit”: the “witty conceits of these poems dramatize and exemplify sinister processes,” and so “Herbert is not exempting his own ingenuity from that he is attacking.”<sup>61</sup> The basis for the mode of attack is exactly the thing being attacked; Herbert is thus using artifice to attack artifice (and in so doing emphasizes the doctrinal or, more loosely, the “natural”).

Of course, for “witty” attacks to seem genuine, as in any effective counterargument,

---

<sup>60</sup> “The most sensitive and decorous expression of Caroline piety may be found in the works of George Herbert, whose poems display ‘the beauty of holiness’ more subtly and more persuasively than any of his contemporaries, recording the history of a soul that derives profound comfort from the liturgy, rituals and symbolism of the Anglican Church.” Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restor’d: The Culture of the Stuart Court, 1603-42* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), 246. Herbert, according to Strier, while not a radical Protestant, would have been similarly uneasy about the established Church’s recourse to physical spaces in devotional practice instead of the revelation to the Spirit *through the Word*, as in stricter Lutheran and Calvinist strains; thus, Herbert is sympathetic with the radical impulse without risking antinomianism. In this vein, I see Herbert as more cautious than Parry regarding physical artifacts, but I think the “Anglican” imagery is quite necessary for formal reasons. See *Love Known*, 149-150.

<sup>61</sup> Richard Strier, *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert’s Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 39-40.

Herbert cannot risk attacking a straw man. It should be admitted that the conceits Herbert deconstructs often do seem contrived and convenient, and furthermore his amorous relationship with the poetic process is never in doubt. Part of the risk Herbert takes is having both himself and his reader become so caught up in the aesthetic delights of his project that, as a method of assurance, its didacticism is overshadowed by its poetic grandeur. By Herbert's time, the beauty of the physical artifact was, in fact, a serious contender for the English gentleman's attention, both in and out of Church. While archbishop William Laud concerned himself with projects of decorating dilapidated Churches and restoring elegance to liturgical practices, secular art connoisseurship was itself making an influx from the continent; in Caroline England the secular and religious aesthetics naturally intermixed. When speaking of Herbert's artistic sensibility, similar to that which "disposed [Charles I] towards visual beauty in the services of his Church as a way of directing the senses to a religious end",<sup>62</sup> Graham Parry notes that

Although the sensibility that informs these poems is uniquely Herbert's, the ordered religious beauty in which they move was not entirely of Herbert's making: it belonged to a tradition of decorous worship that was shaped by Hooker and refined by Lancelot Andrewes; William Laud would attempt to make it the dominant character of the Anglican Church, and it was certainly the mode of worship approved by King Charles.<sup>63</sup>

An additional phenomenon of the time was the so-called "cult of the virtuoso," a compensatory move on the part of would-be courtiers to redirect their energies in the face of professional failure. Due to the fact that only a "diminishing minority could hope to find useful employment, there was a compelling need to find an emotionally satisfying alternative"<sup>64</sup> in the form of "an

---

<sup>62</sup> Parry, *Golden Age Restor'd*, 243.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>64</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 715.



alternative outlet for their surplus time, energy, and wealth” dilettantism provided.<sup>65</sup> There is more to be said about the virtuoso as it applies to Puttenham (although his output, as with Herbert’s, certainly exceeds the aesthetic standards of the aristocrat dilettante). With Herbert, it is more important to note that virtuosic performance and genuine appreciation of artistic ingenuity were prevailing attitudes that are thrown into the mix with his devotional subject matter. Herbert, in this context, would seem to be constantly balancing the aesthetic and the thematic, perhaps only to note its provisional character in orienting, like the Word, the Christian toward individual revelation.<sup>66</sup>

These aesthetic considerations might militate somewhat against the riskiness of the dialectic which Herbert opens up between the aesthetic and the thematic, noted above. Such danger is one Herbert often thematized, and more than one critic has commented on the often quite dramatic reversals which occur in his poems, diminishing somewhat the complexity of the poetic conceits Herbert has erected with such care for the purposes of demonstrating that imagery’s doctrinal incompatibility. Puttenham would call this an instance of *metanoia*:

Otherwhiles we speak and be sorry for it, as if we had not well spoken, so that we seem to call in our word again and to put in another fitter for the purpose, for which respects the Greeks called this manner of speech the Figure of Repentance; then, for that upon repentance commonly follows amendment, the Latins called it the figure of Correction [*correctio*], in that the speaker seemeth to reform that which was said amiss.<sup>67</sup>

Strier has often pointed out the tendency in Herbert’s poems both for “the visual and the

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 721.

<sup>66</sup> For the importance of individual revelation to Herbert, see *Love Known*, 144-146, and Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth Century Literature* (1972; Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1994), 215.

<sup>67</sup> Puttenham, *Art of English Poesy*, 3.19.300.

semantic” to “be at odds”<sup>68</sup> and for the conclusion “to blow everything that preceded it ‘quite away.’”<sup>69</sup> Speaking about “The Altar,” Strier locates this motive in Herbert’s theological uneasiness with visual representation (*ekphrasis*).

But why, in a poem so deeply distrustful of craft, one that invokes perhaps the most powerful anti-craft moment in the Hebrew bible [the injunction against erecting an altar with hewn stone], would the poem want to ascribe a tour-de-force of ostentatious poetic art to God? Herbert has already distinguished himself, as a person, from the poem (“if I chance to hold my peace”), and we have noted that the “frame” could be his body. The altar that he truly cares about is not the perfect classical altar of the physical poem but the “broken altar” that God, through His unique transforming power, has produced within his spiritual being.<sup>70</sup>

Strier here explains much about the ambiguous relationship between form and content in “The Altar” and other poems like it; while he notes that “The Altar” could have just as likely been written by a Puritan iconoclast, he also makes clear that a more complex reading of Herbert’s orientation toward materiality has more to do with excessive attachment to a physical object, here called to mind by the physical shape of the poem itself:

A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant reares,  
Made of a heart, and cemented with teares:  
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;  
No workman’s tool hath trouch’d the same.  
    A HEART alone  
    Is such a stone,  
    As nothing but  
    Thy pow’r doth cut.  
Wherefore each part  
Of my hard heart  
Meets in this frame,  
To praise thy name:

---

<sup>68</sup> Richard Strier, “George Herbert and Ironic Ekphrasis,” *Classical Philology* 102, no. 1 (2007): 106.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

That, if I chance to hold my peace,  
These stones to praise thee may not cease.  
O let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,  
And sanctifie this ALTAR to be thine.

The fault in such excessive attachment to the “visual” appeal of “The Altar” or to the form of Herbert’s poems in general, in Strier’s mind, lies in the fact that it privileges the formal over the semantic: “The poem is certainly going to raise the issue of sacrifice, and equally certainly going to raise the question of the status and value of poetic art, but we must read the words of the poem to know what [“The Altar”] is saying about these things.”<sup>71</sup> The first lines, “A broken Altar, Lord, thy servant reares, / Made of a heart, and cemented with tears” (1-2), for instance, speak of an altar entirely distinct from the poetic altar spoken of as a “frame” built by Herbert mentioned in line eleven. Instead, the altar that is the subject of the poem is nonphysical, “Made of a heart, and cemented with teares” (2) — and moreover it is one “Whose parts are as thy hand did frame” (3), which displaces the true altar-building agency to God. When the altar is mentioned again in the final line, “And Sanctifie this Altar to be thine” (16), we are not sure to which altar Herbert is referring. Strier argues that, for the poem’s ambiguity be rendered coherent, the physical poetic altar must at this moment point away from itself and toward the inward “broken altar” “that God, through His unique transforming power, has produced within [Herbert’s] spiritual being.” Finally, the poem as artifact persists only to ensure ongoing praise: “That, if I chance to hold my peace, / These stones to praise thee may not cease.” Rather than utilizing the *aere perennius* trope, Herbert “is merely claiming that [the poem] will continue to exist, and to say what it is saying.”<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 109.

What Strier points to as the ambiguity between semantics and form in “The Altar” also foregrounds the usefulness of Herbert’s aesthetics to the *general* problem of Christian assurance in a way that is doctrinally sound. That is, assurance is written formally into his poems by allowing the anxious Christian to engage with them aesthetically by utilizing his own discernment in the act of reading. But, because this is a seemingly passive process on the part of the author that obscures the doctrinal intention behind it (showing the “corrections” to the poetry and *not* rendering his poem in a “final” draft form), poetic labor is effectively dissembled. Depending on the condition of its receiver, a Herbert poem can perform both kinds of work, aesthetic and doctrinal, while at the same time seeming not to. The bitter pill of Christian anxiety is thus sweetened by a method that reveals the close economy of doctrine and matters of taste. Also, to reiterate, there is the fact that the extensive number of elaborate, highly imagistic conceits offer a catalog of poetic situations that comprise a “complete description” of the various interlinked subjective interests within the objective condition of that poetry’s reception — they are Herbert’s version of Puttenham’s examples, which show Christian “decencies of sundry sorts” rendered formally as well as thematically in his poetry. Because rules for Christian behavior are always secondary to the subjective experience of living as a Christian, an adequately mimetic Protestant poetics would have to account for the variability (including, as we have seen, the fallibility) of such experience. Why Herbert accomplishes such an accurate poetic representation of Christian experience is due to the fact that he builds into his poetry conceits like that of “The Altar,” the form of which being in the shape of an altar complicates the poems argument for a “broken altar,” and which therefore necessitates the reader to be a highly cognizant of how its form and content are aligned or misaligned (he must choose which altar, the

---

poem or the one the poem speaks of, is more apposite to Herbert's purpose in writing). These kinds of scenarios, when taken together, form a corpus that, while conversant with Protestant doctrine, are not explicitly doctrinal in their presentation, in the sense that they do not say how they should be interpreted or which interpretations are to be privileged — "The Altar," for instance, can be interpreted as facilely coherent or ambiguous, with only an astute, doctrinally-informed reader perhaps recognizing the ambiguity (and, I believe, its argument *for* ambiguity in matters involving Christian experience) inherent in presenting an argument for a "broken" altar within a poetic altar that is architecturally sound. To get at doctrinal incompatibility in "The Altar," it would seem to follow that the reader must have the right degree of aesthetic discernment to recognize firstly its formal virtuosity; that is, to recognize the argument for ambiguity in the "The Altar," one must be highly attendant to matters of form and poetics (a learned fascination with "shape poems," to which Puttenham dedicates much space in *The Art*, would be of much help, for example). To the degree that poetics here implies doctrinal matters, the learned reader would be "lead" to a "correct" reading of the ambiguity — a kind of tacit argument for assurance that, by involving aesthetic judgment, bends rather than breaks the rule that election must be internally revealed. This is to say that, as much as Herbert tests his reader, he also tests poetic art itself as an appropriate vehicle for doctrinal matters: like Christian experience, poetry is a medium wherein doctrine is instanced, rather than explained. And, as Bourdieu makes clear, if something cannot be codified, a complete description of practice must be invoked; in Herbert, this means that there must be *many* instances of poetic accounts of doctrinal matters to account for the variability inherent to the experience of living according to the Law.

To this end, I think that, in addition to Strier's reading of "The Altar," another is

suggested that does not so completely do away with the importance of visual representation and its concomitant dependence upon poetic performance. The printing history of “The Altar” suggests that its shape has functioned quite effectively as an attention-getter from the start, a fascination with its visual representation evidenced by increasingly elaborate emphases by printers of its architectural qualities.<sup>73</sup> Had he lived longer, Herbert might have bemoaned such formulations as indicative of a widespread misinterpretation of the poem’s calculated inconsistency of the altar existing as poetic artifact and the broken altar of the heart to which the poem alludes. As it stands, however, such attention to its form has been a factor in allowing it to continue to “say what it is saying.” There is much critical literature that would argue that this is not accidental on the part of Herbert. Vendler, for instance, has argued that contradictory elements coexist in Herbert’s poetry in order to better align it with the idea, given doctrinal emphasis in Christian theology, that “logic is fallible”; in effect, Herbert transforms human fallibility into a procedural assumption on which to base his poetics:

[Herbert] is constantly criticizing what he has already written, and he often finds the original conception inadequate, whether the original conception be the Church’s, the Bible’s, or his own. Nothing is exempt from his critical eye, when he is at his best, and there is no cliché of religious expression or personal experience that he does not reject after being tempted into expressing it.<sup>74</sup>

“The Altar” is perhaps the ideal candidate for such a consideration of Herbert’s poetry. The astute reader might assume that Herbert originally conceived the shape of “The Altar” as a witty

---

<sup>73</sup> See Hutchinson’s commentary on “The Altar”: “The poem, as written in the MSS. and printed in 1633, follows the shape of a classical altar. From 1634 to 1667 the shape is further emphasized by lines drawn around the poem. The lines are replaced from 1674 by an engraving of a full-length Christian altar under a classical canopy, with the poem set under the canopy.” *The Works of George Herbert*, 484. Hutchinson also observes that the altar as written is a classical rather than Christian altar.

<sup>74</sup> Vendler, *Poetry of George Herbert*, 29.

poetic conceit before realizing its incompatibility with Christian doctrine. In this picture, “The Altar” cannot be ekphrastic or unambiguously doctrinal because to be either would obviate the fallibility its formalism represents, namely that we must move past the “failure” of an ostensibly physical altar to fully appreciate its contrast with the Protestant doctrinal altar of the heart.

While Herbert cannot ascribe the aesthetic object to God’s hand, the implication here that Strier omits is that Herbert wants the ascription of a virtuosic formal object to the poet himself to be as explicit as possible. This is still in line with Reformation doctrine: man inevitably fails to measure up theologically to God the architect of the heart; Herbert’s altar may be ingenious, but God’s is incomparable. However, the incapacity to erect a proper altar does not mean his is unimportant (it is, in fact, similar to the function of the Word in individual revelation that Strier notes elsewhere: it is the text to which the heart aligns itself). Being a virtuosic poet, however, provides the most stark illustration of human fallibility: “The Altar” argues not only that overemphasizing materiality, such as that belonging to an aesthetic object, is a mistake, but that a craftsman as brilliant as Herbert can make it. Herbert transforms aesthetic success into doctrinal failure, but, inasmuch as consciousness of that failure is essential in a Calvinist doctrinal context, that failure in turn becomes a useful Protestant poetic device.

Herbert is not the only one, however, to perceive the theological importance of “correction” in matters of poetic conduct. *Metanoia* also carries its own theological connotations in Puttenham, for, as the “Figure of Repentance,” it emphasizes the ethical and pedagogical imperative of his ideal of poetic conduct. In his analysis of “Love Unknown,” Ira Clark connects the figure to Herbert: “Herbert’s dialogue/agon in which God (or the Friend) corrects the rebellious persona in order to save him seems to be carried on in a probe and expansion of

*metanoia* or *correctio*,” the rhetorical figure of “making straight” or “setting right.”<sup>75</sup> He goes on:

It is critically significant that Puttenham returns to the primary Greek meaning of the figure—the repentant. For the repentant emphasizes imitation, as most rhetorical figures must initially have been thought to be reflections, of a psychic state in the speaker. Furthermore, this particular psychic condition contains a serious pun on a sacred human condition. In describing a rhetorical figure Puttenham is more importantly discussing a crucial event for the Christian psyche; he emphasizes that the repentant reflects the anguish attending recognition of a sin as well as the corrective revelatory afterthought.<sup>76</sup>

Clark has begun to note the deeper connection between Herbert’s poetic form and his poetics of conduct. To get at how exactly this device illuminates the process behind Herbert’s intention to help the lay Christian through his poetry, we must first get beyond thinking of *metanoia* as a complete reversal of poetic intention and consider how, in light of the doctrinal restrictions elucidated above, Herbert’s corrections can be viewed as a coherent, theologically informed strategy that argues for assurance. As it stands now, form simply rallies attention in order to divest itself of meaning (and any prideful claims).<sup>77</sup>

Vendler once more suggests a productive way of viewing the formal elements of the poem that are “left in” (various maneuvers and revisions that might be corrected in a final draft by another poet) as integral to the final argument of Herbert’s poems. I made the claim that Herbert is just as fixated on the process as the final result, but to get at this we must first foreground why and in what form poetic process could be especially beneficial to offering the

---

<sup>75</sup> Ira Clark, ““Lord, In Thee the Beauty Lies in the Discovery’: ‘Love Unknown’ and Reading Herbert,” *ELH* 39, no. 4 (1972), 578.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 578.

<sup>77</sup> “In losing the poem Herbert also loses, happily, the prideful claims it made silently in his name, and in this way he makes of its writing an act no less self-diminishing than the experience it records and provides.” Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, 215.



reader assurance that he can make similar internal reform, reorienting himself to perhaps better perceive God's grace. Part of this project, Vendler allows us to see, involves Herbert's prioritizing of emotion over reason:

Intellectuality alone, as in texts of controversy, was of no interest to Herbert: rather, as we can tell from *Divinitie* and other poems, he thought it positively dangerous insofar as it was likely to distract from feeling. No sentiment is more unequivocally expressed and more constantly affirmed in this work than the absolute primacy of lived experience over abstraction.<sup>78</sup>

The preference for lived experience rather than abstraction will be crucial later. What should be noted now is how this preference manifests itself in Herbert's lyric process:

That interior work of seeing life accurately which must, at least in logical priority, precede accurate expression is particularly evident in Herbert, and is sometimes not even complete before the poem begins; the refining and purifying continue even as the poem is actually being constructed. Before the notion or experience is written down, much has happened in the way of analysis, scrutiny, refusal, comparison, and testing.<sup>79</sup>

Vendler's claim that Herbert emphasizes emotion and lived experience over abstraction (for which we can read doctrine) does two things: first, it prioritizes in Herbert exactly the same operation that the lay Christian would be urged to perform when using the practical syllogism of the experimental predestinarians ("*analysis, scrutiny, refusal, comparison, and testing,*" my italics); second, it urges us to contend with the Calvinist scrutiny of lived experience on aesthetic rather than neurotic or other generally negative terms. One might even view such scrutiny as an internalization of connoisseurship culture as it applies to Christian experience, as the ability to discern the elegance of Christian existence, even if such experience is ultimately qualified by a spiritualism that to some degree must reject worldly things. It must be said that the kind of aesthetic appreciation native to a culture of connoisseurship — the craft of devotional poetry,

---

<sup>78</sup> Vendler, *Poetry of George Herbert*, 6.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 7.

religious art, etc. being appreciated for its own sake — is not unlike the testability of faith in the English Calvinist paradigm: to know the good is just to intuit that it is so, the theological analogue of which is what is called the “reflex act” in predestinarian theology. According to Kendall, Protestant divines call the reflex act of faith any by which the “*knowledge* of faith is the ‘conclusion’ deduced by its effects.”<sup>80</sup> Assurance, therefore, is intimately related to but not identical with acts of faith; like the formal features of a Herbert poem, it is a vehicle rather than a tenor, something performed largely for the purposes of being scrutinized. The importance of the reflex act here is twofold: it foregrounds action as having evidentiary status and, because of the careful economy between faith and works implied by this account of the testability of faith, it argues that assurance should be considered both an exterior as well as interior phenomenon, physical artifacts being something externally concrete the anxious spirit can latch itself onto for purposes of assurance. Such a conception is conversant with Beza’s more “active” version of Calvinism Perkins introduced into England: “Beza directs us not to Christ but to ourselves, which points us back, as it were, to the decree of election.” Thus, while “Calvin thinks that looking to ourselves leads to anxiety, or sure damnation, Beza thinks otherwise. Sanctification, or good works, is the infallible proof of saving faith.”<sup>81</sup> Beza seems to take advantage of the equivocation noted above on the part of Calvin that relates back to the question of the active will with regard to faith, in effect widening Perkin’s doctrine of saving faith to include a limited doctrine work (the internal form of work that Strier points out). Saving faith — that is, faith revealed to be “saving” by active scrutiny of the claim of having it — is based on the Christian’s

---

<sup>80</sup> Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism*, 33.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

orientation not only toward matters concerning a passive aesthetic appreciation of religious artifacts or lived Christian experience, but also toward artifacts of secular vocation, both of which would be on the mind at some point of an aristocratic gentleman such as Herbert. (Vocation also further raises the question of active self-improvability — “every hour, every moment things have to be thought through again, and the surface of the heart must be renewed, quickened, mended, supplied,”<sup>82</sup> as Vendler puts it.)

Malcolmson addresses both issues of vocation and doctrinal intent in her work on the Protestant ethic’s influence on Herbert. If we are to consider Herbert’s reader as an aristocrat, influenced equally by the aesthetic and religious paradigms outlined above, Malcolmson’s treatment of Herbert as writing to a “select, elite group” is particularly helpful in hypothesizing such an audience. She terms Herbert’s mode of writing to aristocratic intimates “coterie verse,” a mode of witty, poetic debate where poems are answered with poems in order to show off wit and to demonstrate one’s belonging to the same class as the poet one is answering. Malcolmson cites as evidence for Herbert’s participation in this type of poetic mode his “sacred parody” of the prior work of his relative, Philip Sidney, as well as the fact that the “Sidney-Herbert clan” would have been involved in a “reciprocal exchange of patronage, support and hospitality” in return for shows of respect and loyalty.<sup>83</sup> In Malcolmson’s mind, Herbert’s poetry is best understood as having been written in the context of such a patronage network:

Because of Herbert’s upper-class status, he withheld most of his poetry from commercial publication during his lifetime. I believe that he regularly presented his devotional lyrics to a select, elite group. Some critics have argued that Herbert’s English lyrics were not known to others in any significant way until the publication of *The Temple* after his death

---

<sup>82</sup> Vendler, *Poetry of George Herbert*, 29.

<sup>83</sup> Malcolmson, *Heart-Work*, 47.

in 1633. Underlying these arguments is the assumption that social performance within a patronage network and the expression of religious conviction are mutually exclusive.<sup>84</sup>

As we have seen, Protestant doctrine and some degree of self-improvement can be placed in a rather easy economy with one another. Malcolmson extends this logically to include overt self-advancement of the kind seen in courtesy theory. She further grounds this point by noting that Herbert's purported circulation of lyrics would serve precisely this purpose in the context of "poetic debate," in which answering a poem with a witty poetic response functioned to "request entrance into the upper-class circle that had produced it and to take on that coterie's air of gentility." Religious poetry thus served the function of gentility-making. Central to gentility-making is poetry's epideictic function, that the "point of the debate was to demonstrate one's verbal skills, not to express a personal opinion" — skills learned by aristocrats of Herbert's kind at the "universities and the Inns of Court." Thus, we must consider *The Temple*, according to Malcolmson, "not as a set of private meditations but as part of Herbert's lifelong performance within the Herbert circle."<sup>85</sup>

The main advantage of Malcolmson's treatment of Herbert to the current study is that it identifies a plausible context for the reception for Herbert's poetry where it can perform work beyond a strictly personal, devotional capacity — that is, for *The Temple* to help any "dejected poor soul," as Herbert is reported to have said about his corpus close to his death.<sup>86</sup> Also important here is the emphasis on poetic performance as a kind of conduct, a behavior that is

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>86</sup> Izaak Walton, *Lives of John Donne, Henry Wotton, Rich'd Hooker, George Herbert, &c., Volume Two*. (1898; Project Gutenberg, 2004) <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/13139>

meant to be scrutinized by others for one's personal benefit. While I find particularly interesting and instructive Malcolmson's extension of Herbert's poetics to account for modes of self-advancement, I find problematic her implied disjunction between Herbert's formal virtuosity and the religious content of his poems. While Malcolmson would certainly agree that the content of Herbert's poetry is religious, any kind of devotional intention is rendered secondary in her reading in favor of motivations involving personal rivalry within Herbert's coterie.<sup>87</sup> I think that when Malcolmson makes clear that "the assumption that social performance within a patronage network and the expression of religious conviction are mutually exclusive" is incorrect in the sense that Herbert's devotional poetry can advance one's position even as it expresses deeply felt religious convictions, she in fact implies an aristocratic, religious sphere where *both* the ambitious and Calvinist anxieties surrounding one's status can in fact be ameliorated. If Herbert's coterie was equally conversant with both theological anxiety and the social pressure of ambition and privilege, Herbert's *Temple* might very well have done good work even as its poems were disseminated to benefit Herbert's own social standing. In fact, if those in his coterie were indeed involved in circulating religious poetry, the rivalrous atmosphere would perhaps function to catalyze the revelation of personal religious conflicts that might have been ameliorated by Herbert's ostensibly self-advancing responses. That this ameliorative process is actually the prime motivator for Herbert is hinted at by his firm standing in the Herbert-Sidney coterie, which would perhaps have obviated the need for gentility-making of the kind which

---

<sup>87</sup> "I agree with Strier that Herbert does not have the attitude toward the world implicit in Christian humanism, but Strier's consideration of 'The Church-porch' and 'The Elixer' in the context of humanism rather than the doctrine of vocation allows him to exaggerate Herbert's ultimate 'retreat from the world.'" Malcolmson, *Heart-Work*, 243 n. 4. To this end, she disagrees almost wholeheartedly with Strier, who has argued cogently for form to in fact *mirror* the religious content of Herbert's poems.

Malcolmson speaks. For now, it is enough to say that what Malcolmson has revealed is the particularly interesting intersection of ambitious conduct and doctrinal behavior in the context of Herbert's "coterie verse." What remains to be seen is why exactly Herbert's formal project would be effective in a context involving both ambition and spiritual amelioration.

### **Herbert's Method of Assurance in *The Temple***

*The Temple* begins with "The Church-porch," a lengthy catalog addressing matters of Christian decorum. However, this poem is functionally different than other poems in *The Temple* which deal with similar subject matter. Strier notes its outlier status, insofar as the outright "moral counsel" it contains concerns itself with worldly advancement: "The message of the poem is ambition and privilege."<sup>88</sup> While Fish is convinced that "The Church-porch" is directed to a young man belonging to the general class "to whom catechisms were customarily addressed,"<sup>89</sup> I agree with Strier that Fish's reliance on catechistical logic precludes the poem's rather obvious obsession with self-advancement:<sup>90</sup>

Thou, whose sweet youth and early hopes inhance  
Thy rate and price, and mark thee for a treasure;  
Hearken unto a Verser, who may chance  
Ryme thee to good, and make a bait of pleasure.  
A verse may finde him, who a sermon flies,  
And turn delight into a sacrifice. (1-6)

Yet "A verse may finde him, who a sermon flies" can certainly be taken (and was perhaps meant to be taken) in the sense Fish asserts. This hints perhaps that it is not the content of the poem that renders Fish's and Strier's readings mutually exclusive, but the way in which that content is

---

<sup>88</sup> Strier, "Sanctifying the Aristocracy," 47.

<sup>89</sup> Fish, *Living Temple*, 126.

<sup>90</sup> Strier, "Sanctifying the Aristocracy," 47 n. 46.

mobilized — that is, how its concepts are rendered formally. Lines like “If reason move not Gallants, quit the room / (All in a shipwrack shift their severall way) / Let not a common ruine thee intombe” (43-35) do engage with issues of prudence, *kairos*, and common Christian values that the rest of *The Temple* will explore, and thus makes “The Church-porch” an appropriate introductory piece. But such issues of decorum are not deployed in a way that would involve the reader in the complexity of discharging such virtues:

Despite its opening mention of turning “delight into a sacrifice,” “The Church-porch” does not aim to transform its audience. It is not clear, moreover, that the speaker of the poem — whom I believe to be fully identical with the young George Herbert — believes that his audience needs to be fundamentally transformed. There is no indication that the values of the speaker are different from those of his audience.<sup>91</sup>

What is immediately evident in Strier’s reading is that, if we are to consider the poem as rhetorical at all, it should be a species of epideictic, more concerned with displaying shared normative values than with assuaging existing spiritual anxieties in Herbert’s readership. Strier also notes the fact that this poem might very well predate the poems located in *The Temple* proper,<sup>92</sup> so we must take into account an older, perhaps more sympathetic and doctrinally aware Herbert’s intention in placing “The Church-porch” at the figurative entryway into his *Temple*. Strier might also suggest an answer to this when he makes the claim that “Herbert’s later revulsion from such considerations [of self-advancement] is inversely related to the prominence of such considerations in ‘The Church-porch’ and in the life which this poem both reflects and

---

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>92</sup> “I have already suggested that ‘The Church-porch’ is a very early poem of Herbert’s. I have argued elsewhere that Herbert’s major lyrics exhibit an extreme sensitivity to and revulsion from prudential and self-enhancing considerations.” Ibid., 56.

manifests.”<sup>93</sup> If “The Church-porch” acts as a kind of counterpoint to the logic, both thematically and formally, of the rest of *The Temple* (this poem is both a thematic and formal introduction), we can hypothesize what use a more poetically mature Herbert might have for it. Indeed, in the beginning stanza, Herbert identifies himself as a “Verser,” which carries the connotation of being something less than a fully-fledged poet (a quite overt use of *sprezzatura*).<sup>94</sup> To get at this use a mature Herbert might have, we will need to consider a poem concerned with similar matters, and yet distinct in how it addresses such matters formally.

“Employment” (II) perhaps addresses the coterie that Malcolmson argues is so essential for understanding *The Temple*:

He that is weary, let him sit.  
   My soul would stirre  
 And trade in courtesies and wit,  
   Quitting the furre  
 To cold complexions needing it.       (1-5)

Immediately, one can perceive the formal counterpoint: the image of discharging one’s station is transformed into a gesture of Christian charity evidenced by the speaker’s taking in a fellow Christian from the cold — a heated interior is suggested by the following stanza’s metaphor: “Man is no starre, but a quick coal / Of mortall fire” (6-7) — and giving him added warmth (“trade in courtesies and wit”). In the poem, Herbert transforms a practical and very likely aesthetic object (“furre,” standing in metaphorically for trading in “courtesies and wit”) into one with spiritual benefit: for Herbert, (as Malcolmson has shown) conversation is at the same time

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>94</sup> According to Hutchinson’s note, “Verser” is “a more modest claim than poet for the writer of the didactic introduction.” See *The Works of George Herbert*, Edited by F.E. Hutchinson (1941: Reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 477. This use of “Verser” might also be a species of *sprezzatura*, inasmuch as it would serve to render the poetry which follows all the more impressive.



spiritual, practical, and aesthetic. To the degree that this aspect of conversation is paralleled by poetic debate, aesthetic grandeur is what advances Herbert's poetry in his circle, and is what allows it to do its pastoral work. Thus "trade in courtesies and wit" (if we take "trade" in its nominal, economic sense) is precisely the situation that would advance or secure Herbert socially within his coterie. What we have, then, is a tension resting on that between a reading of the narrative action of the poem and a perhaps more symbolic reading that could indicate the less-than-spiritual work the poem is performing. If we take Malcolmson's contextual argument at its full force, both are equally suggestive renderings of "trade" — the reader is left to decide which to choose, or, more importantly, if both readings are in fact mutually exclusive. In any case, the interpretive capacity and discernment of the reader is called out as being integral to the completion of the poem, resting on a tacit privileging of the multivalence of "trade." This moves towards an empowerment of the reader that rests on the dispensation of a formal artifact, one based on questions raised of how best to discern that formal artifact. One within Herbert's aristocratic circle might mark it as a witty, metathematic remark about the nature of coterie verse couched in religious metaphor; in a quite different orientation, the aristocratic reader having serious doubts concerning his spiritual status would perhaps sense that a fundamental capacity within him was being exercised and strengthened. This engagement with social and religious horizons, both centered on the poem as artifact, represents the intersection of what Frances Cruickshank calls the distinct "horizontal" and "vertical" planes" literary scholarship must address for a proper a consideration of the aesthetics of the lyric:

The horizontal plane, the one privileged by new historicism, is about attachments, histories, practices and episodes.... The vertical plane is about verbal space and literary architecture; prosody, imagery, narrative; authority, sincerity, humility, self-consciousness; the physical, sensual sound and taste of words; the event of which

historical context is the immediate *past*.<sup>95</sup>

English Calvinism and Herbert's coterie (and attendant high-culture aesthetics and courtesy implicated in both) here make up the horizontal plane that needs to be taken into account in addition to form. The horizontal plane, then, provides an answer to the question of how a hypothetical, anxious aristocratic reader might plausibly react to the dispensation of the formal object in question. In Cruickshank's terminology, this is a question of how "visible problematics are part of a new kind of literary consciousness that invites the reader to participate knowingly in poetry's operations."<sup>96</sup>

How the rest of the poem is handled is a further indication of the importance of these "visible problematics." After the wonderfully hair-raising metaphor of man as a mortal coal, the desire of whom "Lest his own ashes choke his soul," comes the most doctrinally dense conceit of the poem:

Oh that I were an Orenge-tree,  
                                    That busie plant!  
Then should I ever laden be,  
                                    And never want  
Some fruit for him that dressed me.                      (21-25)

This militates, if but momentarily, against life considered as "a businesse, not good cheere" (16) — incidentally, the view of life represented in "The Church-porch." The image of the tree represents the naïve version of Christian courtesy, that by faith (fruit) we can recompense him who "dressed" us (fertilized with faith). The contradiction here is immediately evident. This moves the reader on to the final stanza, and to the final *metanoia*:

---

<sup>95</sup> Frances Cruickshank, *Verse and Poetics in George Herbert and John Donne* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 4.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

But we are still too young or old;  
                    The Man is gone,  
Before we do our wares unfold:  
                    So we freeze on,  
Until the grave increase our cold.                      (26-30)

The melancholy note on which this ends cannot be ignored, but it is only so if the contradiction is taken in its negative sense. Again the reader is asked to choose between two possibilities: (1) the fact that we cannot recompense Christ with faith because we already have it, and in this sense lack capability, or (2) the blissful fact that we already have faith. The discerning reader will notice that the central image obscures assurance behind a witty, melancholic conceit the fact that the poem argues for the reader's having saving faith. The process of *metanoia* or *correctio* here (having the reader choose between competing metaphors) acts to destabilize a monolithic reading of melancholy, allowing room for the reader to navigate conscientiously towards the positive assertion of Christian assurance. Herbert acts here to align (or rather misalign) the courtesy tradition he is familiar with (cited at the beginning of the poem) with Protestant doctrine in a way that, while thematically critiquing the Christian's capacity to "work" for his own faith, argues for assurance by implication — a tacit argument for the importance of the reader's faculty of discernment, and thus engages with the secular kind of work aesthetic discernment entails. If the reader has successfully negotiated the problematic metaphors, then, the irony (insofar as the wish to give back obviates the need to work for his salvation by implying that he already has it) behind the speaker's naïve wish to be the tree that gives back becomes clear as a strategic, dispositive motion to show how one can come to a successfully doctrinal understanding of the poem. That is, if one discerns how the tree conceit implodes under the weight of its ironical logic (one is already what one wants to be), one gets at the doctrinal logic of assurance couched within it. In a roundabout way, at least, form argues for content here. Herbert, by counting on

his reader's aesthetic discernment to aid in deconstructing the poem's imagery, re-erects out of its ruins an argument for a faculty of discernment that addresses problems of assurance.

"Jordan" (I) asks, "Is there no truth in beautie? / Is all good structure in a winding stair?" (2-3).

It seems that "true" beauty is got at precisely by *not* having a "good structure," at not least in the traditional sense. Herbert's good structure is of a completely different kind than that seen in a more traditional poem such as "The Church-porch." Rather than resting final and complete, Herbert's "good structure" revels in inconsistencies that exist in order give the reader a space to safely navigate failure and come out the better for it.

In "The Church-porch," however, there is no such room for maneuvering. At best, "The Church-porch" implies that considering Christian doctrine and self-advancement have some economy in the poetic sequence that follows. At worst, it precludes the possibility of readerly engagement of the kind that translates "Employment" (II) successfully into a poetic *situation* — one of many different such scenarios that make *The Temple* a comprehensive interrogation of Christian conduct. What makes this interrogation engaging with respect to the reader is the fact that, unlike "The Church-porch," rules of conduct are elided in favor poetic *comprehensum*. The metaphors of "Employment" (II) create a complex situation wherein poetic behavior invites scrutiny; things such as prudence, *kairos*, and Puttenham's "decencie" are then all back on the table. Herbert here deals pragmatically with the fact, as Bourdieu argues, that "only a virtuoso with a perfect command of his 'art of living' can play on all the resources inherent in the ambiguities and uncertainties of behavior."<sup>97</sup> Hence, to "substitute *strategy* for the *rule* is to reintroduce time," a view of practice as containing all of the contingent variables of worldly

---

<sup>97</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline*, 8.

existence. Part of why “The Church-porch” fails to measure up is because of its normativity; indeed, “It is therefore practice ... which is annihilated when the scheme is identified with the model.”<sup>98</sup> This careful balance of aesthetic taste and Calvinist doctrine directly confronts the Christian aristocratic reader with engaging situations, a poetic strategy which obviates the need for rules like those seen at work in “The Church-porch.”

That Herbert is aware of this careful economy of aesthetic taste and doctrine can also be seen in “Employment” (I), which is the closest we get to a metric of conduct in *The Temple* proper. We again have an elaborate floral conceit:

If as a flowre doth spread and die,  
 Thou wouldst extend me to some good,  
 Before I were by frosts extremitie  
 Nipt in the bud” (1-5)

The next two stanzas extend this conceit, while at the same time they highlight the different registers at which praise becomes operative:

The sweetnesse and the praise were thine;  
 But the extension and the room,  
 Which in thy garland I should fill, were mine  
 At thy great doom.

For as thou dost impart thy grace,  
 The greater shall our glorie be.  
 The measure of our joyes is in this place,  
 The stuffe with thee. (5-12)

We can easily construe this poem as thematizing the economy of taste and doctrine. By God’s decree (crucially, not Herbert’s), the speaker can only “fill” the garland and call his *place* (we must note the less active connotation of *occupation* here) his own (“the extension and the room, / ... were mine”). The platitude which begins the next stanza is mobilized in order to highlight

---

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

further this distinction in the stanza's final two lines: the "stuffe" (*OED*: "equipment, stores, stock," or "property") is with God, while the joy is, perhaps curiously, relocated to the speaker's earthly place or occupation. In other words, Christian joy lies, unsurprisingly, in *not* obtaining "stuffe" — but here this implies the more important doctrinal point that our only real "stuff," grace, is *given* to us without asking. "Measure," as that which is prescribed or limited in extent (it can also mean something that is given), though, also implies its capacity as a verb of *measuring*, the only way to accurately form the picture of "this place" that Herbert is attempting to construct. The definition of the verb form of *measure*, "to go over with one's eyes" (*OED*), is important here: the place that is separate from the proper "stuffe" that requires discernment to render it appropriately delimited. Thus the final lines of the poem, "Lord place me in thy consort; give one strain / To my poore reed" (23-24) would come across as profoundly inappropriate or discourteous. Even asking for "one strain" for his "poore reed" is asking too much, due to the fact that the gift has already been given; failure to recognize the always-prior beneficence of God is the same as neglecting to say "thank you." The similar process seen in "Employment" (II) is implied here: the reader is asked to take appropriate measure of the "measure" he *already* most likely has, grace or saving faith, to the degree that he notices that these lines are discourteous — that is, to the degree that the poem is logically (or theologically) inconsistent. Again, the importance is not a formalism that is "internally coherent," but rather "externally coherent,"<sup>99</sup> relying on the reader to complete the subjective operations manifested in the poem. Regarding poems such as these that call out to the transcendent, Vendler notes how

---

<sup>99</sup> For a full account of "internal" and "external coherence" in aesthetic theory, see Alois Riegl, *The Group Portraiture of Holland*, Translated by Evelyn M. Kain (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999), 1-57.

“Our sense of Herbert’s highest capacities presses us to ask for an equilibrium never quite attained in these optative breathings, with their hothouse repetitions.”<sup>100</sup> I think it is precisely this perceived *disequilibrium*, this sense of Herbert perhaps not attaining his “highest capacities” that would encourage readerly engagement and would, with the right kind of orientation towards aesthetic discernment, argue poetically for assurance.

### Conclusion

George Herbert, in other words, cannot presume to simplify Christian experience without deluding his readership as to its inherently complex structure, which recourse to mere didacticism would accomplish. I have sought to demonstrate that the contrast of “The Church-porch” to poems which thematize conduct and employment as they relate to Calvinist doctrine, manifest the discrepancy in Herbert’s mind between mere rule-following and the Protestant rule of faith. The active interiority imported into English Protestantism by Perkins and his followers of experimental predestinarians helped make overt recourse to rules of Christian behavior doctrinally untenable. Herbert thus had to look to sources other than theologically naïve accounts of Christian decorum to assuage the anxiety, centered on the incapacity to altar the status of one’s salvation, that the absence of a rubric for behavior engendered, while not at the same time abrogating the theological necessity of the absence of such a rubric. While most likely not aware of George Puttenham’s *Art of English Poesy*, courtesy theory in general was still largely operative in the aristocratic class to which Herbert belonged, which still traded in matters of patronage and social advancement. This theory of conduct, combined with a cultural context increasingly obsessed with aesthetic grandeur, offered Herbert a way of addressing Christian conduct in a non-doctrinal way that ultimately had doctrinal force. This he accomplishes, I have

---

<sup>100</sup> Vendler, *Poetry of George Herbert*, 251.

argued, by happening on a similar explanatory method as that of George Puttenham, a method that, instead of codifying rules of behavior, relies on the discerning faculties of the reader to intuit correct decorum from a comprehensive set of examples. *The Temple*, in my account, represents Herbert's attempt to create a representative set of situations involving Christian decorum that are metaphorized in his poetry, from which the reader with an astute sense of taste or discernment may also deduce certain arguments for assurance couched within that set. I argue that a rhetoric of courtesy is recapitulated for a religiously didactic use where such didacticism is disallowed; thus, a central motivation of courtesy theory, that of dissembling labor, is given operative force within the homiletics of *The Temple*. The advantage of this approach is that it seeks to synthesize two critical trends in Herbert scholarship: the first investigates *The Temple* as document that imports in various forms the aristocratic ideological concerns; the second treats *The Temple* as a pious extension of Herbert's pastoral career. A close attention to conduct, I believe, is something Herbert understood as being essential to both: assuaging individual religious crises at this point in the history of Protestantism was not dissimilar from assuaging class anxiety — in short, English Calvinism carried within it a self-advancing element that could be exploited poetically for the clerical purposes of assurance.



## Bibliography

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999.

Attridge, Derek. "Puttenham's Perplexity: Nature, Art, and the Supplement in Renaissance Poetic Theory." In *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, Edited by Patricia Parker and David Quint. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Bouwsma, William J. *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Clark, Ira. "'Lord, In Thee the Beauty Lies in the Discovery': 'Love Unknown' and Reading Herbert." *ELH* 39, no. 4 (1972): 560-584.

Cruikshank, Frances. *Verse and Poetics in George Herbert and John Donne*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2010.

Dickens, A.G. *The English Reformation*. 2nd. ed. University Park: Penn State Press, 1989.

Fish, Stanley. *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth Century Literature*.

1972. Reprint, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1994.

———. *The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

Gallagher, Michael P. "Rhetoric, Style, and George Herbert." *ELH* 37, no. 4 (1970): 495-516.

Herbert, George. *The Works of George Herbert*, Edited by F.E. Hutchinson. 1941. Reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Kahn, Victoria. "Humanism and the Resistance to Theory." In *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, Edited by Patricia Parker and David Quint. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

Kendall, R.T. *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*. Bletchley: Paternoster, 1997.

Lamb, Julia. "A Defense of Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesy*." *English Literary Renaissance* 39, no. 1 (2009): 24-46.

Lewalski, Barbara Kiefer. *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth Century Religious Lyric*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.

Malcolmson, Cristina. *Heart-Work: George Herbert and the Protestant Ethic*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

May, Steven W. "George Puttenham's Lewd and Illicit Career." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 50, no. 2 (2008): 143-176.

Parry, Graham. *The Golden Age Restor'd: The Culture of the Stuart Court, 1603-42*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981.

Puttenham, George. *The Art of English Poesy: A Critical Edition*, Edited by Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007.

Riegl, Alois. *The Group Portraiture of Holland*. Translated by Evelyn M. Kain. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999.

Schoenfeldt, Michael C. *Prayer and Power: George Herbert and Renaissance Courtship*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Smuts, R. Malcolm. *Court Culture and the Origins of a Royalist Tradition in Early Stuart England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987.

Stone, Lawrence. "Social Mobility in England, 1500-1700." *Past & Present* 33 (1966): 16-55.

- . *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965.
- Strier, Richard. "George Herbert and Irony Ekphrasis." *Classical Philology* 102, no. 1 (2007): 96-109.
- . *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- . *Resistant Structures: Particularity, Radicalism, and Renaissance Texts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- . "Sanctifying the Aristocracy: 'Devout Humanism' in François de Sales, John Donne, and George Herbert." *The Journal of Religion* 69, no. 1 (1989): 36-58.
- Vendler, Helen. *The Poetry of George Herbert*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975.
- Walton, Izaak. *Lives of John Donne, Henry Wotton, Rich'd Hooker, George Herbert, &c., Volume Two*. 1898; Project Gutenberg, 2004. <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/13139>
- Whigham, Frank. *Ambition and Privilege: The Social Tropes of Elizabethan Courtesy Theory*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

Wilcox, Helen. *ODNB*. "George Herbert." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford:  
Oxford University Press, 2004.